# Mortal Man

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SpongeBob never thought that his hero would die, but beneath the super powers and fancy costumes was a mortal, old man. In memory of Ernest Borgnine, aka Mermaid Man, 1917-2012.

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# Chapter 1

Shady Shoes Rest Home was never particularly busy even on Sundays. Weekends always had a bigger *potential* visitor count but very rarely did the visitor count ever actually live up to this potential. Frank, the receptionist, saw it time and time again; a new resident would move in and for the first few months the family would visit and make a great deal out of bringing flowers or taking their elderly relative for a stroll. Then, after endless games of checkers and the smell of stale urine began to take their toll, their enthusiasm would start to wane, resulting either in a stop to the visits altogether or, perhaps worse, visits which clearly inconvenienced them. They made little attempt to hide the way they sighed in resignation as they entered the building, or glanced unconvincingly at an imaginary watch before proclaiming that it really was quite late and they just had to get to the supermarket or the dentist or pick up the kids from an equally imaginary birthday party.

That's what made SpongeBob SquarePants such an unusual visitor.

Today, like every Sunday, he marched up to the reception desk, grinning profusely, a stack of well-read Mermaid Man comic books tucked under one arm, the other fluttering excitedly at his side. The comic books had been autographed so many times that it was a wonder he was still able to decipher anything beneath the increasingly illegible signatures that covered every page. Frank suspected that he knew every one by heart anyway, if his ability to recite entire episodes on demand was anything to go by. It wasn't too much of a stretch to assume that this ability extended to the medium of comic books. Even when he reached the counter he couldn't stand still and began to bounce on the balls of his feet. His joy was infectious and at first Frank couldn't help but grin himself. But then, with a sickening jolt, he realized why SpongeBob was here and his smile faltered. Hadn't anybody told him?

"Hey, Frank!" chirped SpongeBob, reciting the same greeting he had given every Sunday for the past … however many years it was. Frank had lost track. "I'm here to see Mermaid Man."

The latter part of the greeting had been redundant for a long time, since SpongeBob always came to see Mermaid Man and everybody knew it, but they humored him anyway. He seemed to enjoy saying it.

"Listen, kid," Frank cleared his throat and shifted in his chair uncomfortably, wondering how best to proceed. Experience told him to be blunt, to come right out with it and state the facts, but a pang of guilt and the prospect of shattering the poor kid's heart into a million pieces caused him to hesitate. It was like trying to decide between punching him in the face or nipping him repeatedly. Neither option was appealing.

Clearly failing to perceive the change in tone and Frank's internal struggle, SpongeBob continued to bounce excitedly.

"We're going to re-enact the Sinister Slug story arc from issues #132 through #147. Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy are going to play Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy and I'm going to be the Sinister Slug. I've been practising every night this week. Watch!" he dropped to the floor, comic books spilling across the hallway as his arms snapped rigidly to his sides, and began to flop in what was presumably supposed to be an imitation of a slug but in reality looked like some kind of seizure. A startled orderly popped her head out of the office.

"Hey, kid?" started Frank, "Are you listening to me?" The continued (and now somewhat irritating) slug seizure indicated not, so he raised his voice. "SpongeBob!"

"Mm?" SpongeBob straightened up, suddenly all ears.

"Listen", said Frank again, though it was more a stall for time than a command now, as he already had SpongeBob's undivided attention.

Big blue eyes gazed at him unblinkingly, perhaps expecting one of his many anecdotes about working in the rest home, or a joke, or even just the usual reminder not to wake any sleeping seniors on his way to the rec room. Certainly not what Frank was, eventually, going to have to tell him. "Mermaid Man … he, uh, checked out last night."

"Oh," SpongeBob blinked, then plopped down into one of three chairs that lined the hallway opposite the reception desk, scooped one of his comic books off the floor and begin to flick through. "That's OK. I'll wait for him to get back."

"No, kid," groaned Frank, almost immediately regretting his decision to go down the euphemism path but determined to stick it out anyway, "I mean he's gone to a better place."

"Rococo Reef Rest Home?"

On any other day, Frank would have chuckled indulgently, enjoying SpongeBob's trademark misunderstandings and making a mental note of the conversation to share with the guys in the staff room later. Today, however, was not the day for such misunderstandings, charming or otherwise. Frank exhaled in frustration, leaning forward onto his fins and rubbing his temples. "Neptune give me strength ..."

For SpongeBob, it seemed, the penny was finally starting to drop. He approached the counter again, for the first time a fleeting look of uncertainty in his eyes, though he was still half smiling. "Frank?"

"Mermaid Man is dead."

For three long seconds, SpongeBob didn't say anything. Frank couldn't bring himself to look at the boy and instead fixed his gaze on a nearby stack of papers. Out of the corner of his eye he saw SpongeBob's fingers, which had already been gripping the edge of the counter, clench slightly. When SpongeBob finally spoke, his voice was taut with panic and although he was clearly fighting to stay calm his question was riddled with desperation.

"Is that some kind of metaphor?"

"For crying out loud, kid!" barked Frank, "Do you have to make this so difficult?" Again, SpongeBob was silent, knuckles now white from gripping the counter so hard, and a surge of hot guilt turned Frank's stomach. He decided to start over. "Mermaid Man was very old. Do you understand?"

SpongeBob suddenly released the counter from his vice-like grip and took a step backwards, swallowing and swinging his arms as though he wasn't quite sure what to do with them any more. "Well," he squeaked, voice now unnaturally high even for him, "It's been nice talking to you, but I really have to be going now. I've got to pick up the dentist from a birthday party." He turned and began to walk away, evidently trying to keep his composure, though the effect was ruined a little as, upon reaching the exit, he broke into a run, stumbling slightly over the threshold and taking a huge, sobbing breath before disappearing altogether, comic books forgotten and still scattered across the tiled hallway.

# Chapter 2

SpongeBob cried over a lot of things, often, and for far too long. He knew it, but he couldn't help it. He had never quite mastered the art of filtering his emotions, or working out which ones should be expressed and which ones were supposed to quelled and stored up inside until a more appropriate time. Like a visit to the shrink or a dyspeptic family reunion.

It wasn't just tears that came so easily; joy, too, was impossible for him to contain. Much to the annoyance of the general populous of Bikini Bottom, laughter bubbled easily from his lips, shaking his entire body until he could barely stand and was reduced to flopping around on the floor in a lengthy fit of giggles.

What he wouldn't give for a lengthy fit of giggles right now.

He had finally cried himself out; he didn't know how long it had been, but the underwater sun was almost set, casting long, rippling shadows over the living room floor where he lay on his back, exhausted and hiccuping slightly, face still wet with tears. They had pooled uncomfortably in his pores; he pushed himself into a sitting position, shaking his head like a wet worm and consequently showering everything within a 7 foot radius with salty droplets.

Usually he would feel better by now, either because enough time had passed that whatever situation that had upset him in the first place had righted itself, or because it didn't seem so important any more, or because somebody had said something to make him feel better. But none of those things applied today. His hero was still dead and still very important, and it still hurt to think about. It was a different kind of hurt, too. Rather than the quick bursts of roll-around-on-the-floor-sobbing-for-a-while-but-better-pretty-soon kind of sadness that he frequently dealt with, this sadness still lingered, a persistent dull ache in his chest. His breath was still ragged; he closed his eyes and

pressed them into the palms of his hands, taking a large gulp of water and holding it in an attempt to steady himself.

"Meow?" Gary, SpongeBob's pet sea snail, was watching his master warily from the kitchen. He was so used to SpongeBob's episodes by now that he knew to stay well away until the worst was over lest he be doused in a river of tears or suffer permanent ear trauma. Not that snails had ears. But that was beside the point.

"Oh," SpongeBob clambered to his feet, glancing guiltily at the clock, which chimed 9pm. "I still haven't fed you, huh?"

A little unsteady and disoriented, he staggered into the kitchen, groping at the wall for the light switch, and flicked it on, wincing slightly at the sudden brightness. He reached down to pet Gary, who purred affectionately.

"Sorry, Gare-bear."

"Meow?"

SpongeBob mulled the question as he poured a generous helping of kibble into Gary's food bowl. He couldn't bring himself to say "It's nothing", because it wasn't nothing. But for once he didn't feel like discussing what troubled him, so left the question hanging and instead just sank to the kitchen floor to watch Gary eat, knees pulled up to his chest. He wasn't hungry himself. The thought of food made him feel queasy.

By the time Gary took his last bite of kibble it was approaching 9:30pm and SpongeBob was so exhausted that he briefly entertained the possibility of simply crawling into bed and hoping that sleep would overcome him, but the more realistic prospect of lying awake for hours ruminating over the day's events did not appeal to him. Maybe he could watch television to distract himself? Read a book? Then he realized with a pang that in his haste to leave the rest home he had forgotten his prized collection of signed Mermaid Man comic books.

Gary, who would normally have curled up and gone to sleep himself by now, seemed to sense that his owner needed company and for that SpongeBob was extremely grateful. He was less grateful when Gary slithered behind him, grabbed a mouthful of his shirt and began to pull. At first SpongeBob struggled but then decided it wasn't worth using what little energy he had left and allowed himself to be dragged backwards into the living room.

When they reached the sofa, Gary let go and stared intently, almost sternly, at SpongeBob, who took the hint and rolled the last few inches onto the sofa, sighing with relief as he sank face-first into the soft material. It was certainly more comfortable than the kitchen floor.

# Chapter 3

When he looked at the morning in hindsight, Mr. Krabs, owner and proprietor of Bikini Bottom's favorite fast food eatery (aptly named the "Krusty Krab"), should perhaps have suspected that something was amiss with his fry cook.

The first sign was the boy's absence when, bright and early on a crisp Monday morning, he arrived to unlock the front doors and begin another fruitful day of pushing patties. SpongeBob wasn't technically late; it was only 7:30am and employees were not required on site until 9:00am. But usually it was all Mr. Krabs could do to keep SpongeBob away. He had to pry him from the grill, often literally, at the end of each work day, and it was very rare that he didn't arrive in the morning to see the boy already pressed eagerly against the glass of the double front doors, aching to get inside and fulfil his duties. Today, however, SpongeBob was nowhere to be found, although there was still a pair of smudged little hand prints on the doors from earlier in the week. As he unlocked the door, Mr. Krabs made a mental note to get one of his employees to clean it later. SpongeBob would probably jump at the chance … if he ever turned up.

It was two minutes past nine when SpongeBob finally burst into the restaurant, breathless and holding a stitch in his side, and Mr. Krabs was ready to scold him for his tardiness but took pity upon seeing the dark circles under his eyes and uncharacteristically crooked uniform hat. He had clearly had a rough night. That was the second sign.

"I'm sorry – Mr. Krabs -" wheezed SpongeBob, straightening his hat and brushing ineffectually at his clothes in an attempt to make himself look more presentable.

"Where have you been, lad? It's not like you to cut it so fine." Mr. Krabs wrapped a claw around SpongeBob's back and steered him

toward to the kitchen in order to speed up the proceedings and make up for lost time. Then a thought occurred to him and he stopped, grasped SpongeBob by the shoulders and surveyed his pale complexion and slightly bloodshot eyes with a look of suspicion. "You're not sick are you, boy? You know you're not supposed come to work with a disease."

"I'm not sick, Mr. Krabs." said SpongeBob, shuffling his feet and seemingly eager for his boss to release him from his grip and let him get to work. "I just … it's a long story."

He clearly thought that this would bring an end to the conversation, but Mr. Krabs' curiosity was now well and truly piqued. He cocked an eyebrow. "I'm listening."

SpongeBob blinked. "I, uh …" He looked away nervously, almost as if he were ashamed, his gaze coming to rest on his shiny, black shoes. "Stopped to tie my shoe?" He looked up at Mr. Krabs again, blushing furiously. He was a terrible liar.

Every passing minute eating into service time and therefore his profits, Mr. Krabs made an executive decision to drop the matter. "All right, boyo," he sighed, giving SpongeBob another little shove toward the kitchen. "Just don't let it happen again."

"Aye aye, sir!"

As the day progressed, Mr. Krabs was relieved to see SpongeBob gradually return to his usual, bubbly self. Or, more accurately, hear him return to his usual, bubbly self. From his office where he sat alternating between serious number crunching and sorting crisp dollar bills into neat little piles (this latter task didn't really serve any purpose; he just enjoyed doing it), he was able to hear SpongeBob's sporadic giggling and snippets of warbling, tuneless ditties that he made up on the spot to express his happiness about a specific part of food service that he was particularly enjoying at that moment in time.

By way of accompaniment, Squidward punctuated the fry cook's largely meaningless outbursts with outbursts of his own. Conversely, they were nearly always irritable and snarky.

"Will you stop that incessant babbling?" he snapped, "And why haven't you taken that order out to table five yet?"

SpongeBob's chipper voice was audible from everywhere in the restaurant as he kicked the kitchen door open with a bang. "Order up!"

Mr. Krabs wasn't able to make out anything further as SpongeBob's banter with the customers became lost in a sea of other voices that filled the dining room. Perhaps ten seconds went by before SpongeBob's voice suddenly became distinguishable again – in the form of a deafening, high-pitched wail.

Mr. Krabs gave a little wail himself as, in surprise, he accidentally snipped the bill he was holding in his right claw clean in two. He sighed and got up to check the situation in the main restaurant. Poking his head around the office door, he was met with an unfortunately familiar scene. SpongeBob was crying like a fire hydrant, the customers looked mildly startled and Squidward was being Squidward.

"What?" smirked the cephalopod, "Wrong sized drink? Hah!"

Mr. Krabs, suspecting that this meltdown had little to do with food service, dealt with it using considerably more tact than Squidward and ten minutes later, sitting in one of the two chairs opposite his boss's desk, SpongeBob was finally ready to talk.

"Mr. Krabs," he began, swinging his legs and scuffing his feet on the ground nervously, "I have a confession to make. I … wasn't late to work this morning because I stopped to tie my shoe."

With an incredible amount of effort, Mr. Krabs resisted rolling his eyes. "I never really bought that in the first place, lad."

"Oh."

Mr. Krabs waited patiently for an elaboration, a part two to the confession, but none came. SpongeBob was staring at his hands, apparently lost in thought.

"So what's the matter with you today? What was all that about?" He gestured towards the dining room. He noted, for the second time that day, SpongeBob's pallid appearance and his earlier suspicion reared its head. "There's no shame in being sick, boy. It happens to the best of us. Do you need a ride home?"

"I'm not sick, sir, I swear." He paused again. This time, Mr. Krabs didn't break the silence. Instead, he waited, forcing SpongeBob to eventually raise his eyes from his lap and continue the conversation. "Well … it's just, there was a customer out there with a newspaper."

"A newspaper," Mr. Krabs repeated, hoping that it would make more sense if he said it himself. It didn't. "Help me out here, lad. Why did a customer with a newspaper make you cry? Do you have a newspaper phobia? A newsprint allergy?"

"Mermaid Man was on the front page. Because he died."

Suddenly, everything fell into place. Mermaid Man needed no introduction; he (and his sidekick, Barnacle Boy) had been a regular at the Krusty Krab for many years, and SpongeBob doted on him. Publicly. Unashamedly. And often to the annoyance of everybody in the vicinity, including the weary superhero himself. Seeing SpongeBob so heartbroken over the death of a friend made an unpleasant change from seeing him heartbroken over a burned patty or missing name tag.

"Why didn't you just say so, boy?" said Mr. Krabs, shaking his head. "You shouldn't have come into work today."

SpongeBob seemed surprised, bordering on offended. "Why not?"

"Well. When something like this happens, you're allowed to take personal time off. By law." Mr. Krabs wasn't usually a believer in time off, let alone an advocate, but there were certain exceptions, and this was one of them.

"Why would I want to take time off?" asked SpongeBob, still puzzled. "I stayed home for hours yesterday and it was terrible. And didn't you once tell me that any problem I have can be solved with a little hard work?"

"Er … yes, I did," admitted Mr. Krabs, too ashamed to add that he had only said it in order to make the gullible fry cook work harder and not because he thought there was any truth to it.

"I did feel better to begin with," mumbled SpongeBob, dropping his gaze to his lap again, "But it didn't really work this time because I still feel bad."

"This is one of those problems that can't be solved by flipping patties, boy."

SpongeBob looked so deflated at this revelation (literally: the usually angular corners of his head sagged dejectedly) that Mr. Krabs immediately felt guilty and cast around for a motivational pep talk or comforting anecdote. It was difficult. Normally, SpongeBob's problems were easily solvable as they were considered trivial by most sane people, but this time Mr. Krabs was struggling to think of anything to say. Grief was grief, and SpongeBob was quite right to feel it.

Finally, he was struck with an idea.

"So how is Barnacle Boy taking it?"

"Barnacle Boy?" repeated SpongeBob, sitting up a little straighter and shifting slightly. "I don't know. I guess I hadn't really thought about that."

"Maybe you should pay him a visit."

Although SpongeBob didn't turn down the suggestion, he seemed wary. Knowing him well, Mr. Krabs suspected that the boy was torn between the desire to see and possibly help his other hero, and the fear of returning to the place that now had such a negative memory attached to it. Also knowing that the only way to deal with that fear was to face it head on, whether SpongeBob wanted to or not, Mr. Krabs decided that it was time for some tough love.

"Go or you're fired."

# Chapter 4

"I'm ready."

Although he hadn't technically done anything wrong, Squidward felt like a huge jerk. Well. Maybe it was wrong. But he hadn't technically done anything different; he sneered at SpongeBob all the time. In fact, it was almost routine for them.

"I'm ready."

And he hadn't technically caused SpongeBob to cry. He'd just made a joke about it, like any other day, not knowing what had happened the day before, or the effect that it had had on SpongeBob, and just assuming (not unreasonably) that his usually predictable co-worker was having a standard patty-related crisis.

"I'm ready."

In order to suppress his guilt, he internally pinned the blame on SpongeBob.

"I'm ready."

How was anybody supposed to differentiate legitimate grief from the trauma of an incorrect portion size when the sponge expressed both in exactly the same way?

"I'm ready."

It was unfair. An unrealistic expectation. But nevertheless, his karma was damaged and so, in an attempt to reduce the level of karmic payback he was sure to receive at a later date, he had reluctantly agreed to accompany SpongeBob to some smelly rest home.

"I'm ready."

Also, Mr. Krabs had threatened to fire him if he didn't.

"I'm ready."

SpongeBob, apparently, was ready. Squidward welcomed his readiness; so far it had made this escort mission a whole lot easier than he had been expecting it to be.

"..."

Squidward had walked halfway up the home's planked pathway before he realized that SpongeBob had stopped chanting his trademark mantra and was no longer by his side. He whipped around, scanning the vicinity for SpongeBob's distinct bright yellow, and spotted him standing all the way back at the beginning of the path, toes flush against the first plank but unwilling to step on it.

"Get a move on, SpongeBob!" called Squidward, frowning and tapping a tentacle impatiently. SpongeBob didn't get a move on. Squidward tensed his shoulders irritably and retraced his steps back to where SpongeBob was stood rooted to the spot.

"You said you were ready. 47 times." Still receiving no evidence that anybody was home behind those wide, glazed-over eyes, Squidward gave the sponge a forceful nudge, hoping this would prompt him to get the anchor out of his square pants and start walking. It didn't. "All right. Whatever. I was hoping I wouldn't have to use this but you leave me no choice."

He rummaged underneath his shirt until he found what he was looking for – a smooth, silicone handle. He gripped it and pulled, revealing a familiar stainless steel spatula that he had brought along in case a situation like this were to arise, and slowly swung it into SpongeBob's field of vision. This was a trick that Mr. Krabs had taught him and, judging by the way SpongeBob's eyes immediately lit up and locked onto the metal glinting in the underwater sunlight, was about to serve him well. The fry cook sprang to life, tracking the

spatula with now attentive eyes as Squidward flicked it up and down, his face cracking instinctively into a wide, toothy grin.

Given the lightness of the kitchen utensil, a single powerful pitch was enough to send it arcing through the water, straight through the open doors of the rest home, leaving a blazing trail of bubbles and its owner bounding after it in a joyful frenzy.

Squidward followed behind, recoiling slightly as he stepped into the rest home and was greeted by a stale waft of eau de octogenarian. He blinked several times to help his eyes adjust to the cool dimness of the reception area. SpongeBob stood a few feet away, the spatula held loosely in his left hand, the fleeting and fickle moment of joy evaporated as quickly as it had come. He turned to look at Squidward, fearful and almost pleadingly, then opened and closed his mouth several times before fight-or-flight took over and he made a break for the exit.

"Did I tell you that I have to pick up the dentist from a birthday party?"

"Stop it, SpongeBob!" snapped Squidward, grabbing him by the back of the shirt. "I didn't come all this way for you to back out now!"

"I can't do it, Squidward," said SpongeBob miserably, though he stopped struggling, the temporary surge of energy once again leaving him like a deflated balloon. "Please … let's just go back to the Krusty Krab. It's lunch time, Mr. Krabs is probably-"

"In case you forgot," interrupted Squidward, releasing SpongeBob from his grip and causing him to fall face-first onto the floor with a squeak, "It was Krabs who ordered you to come here in the first place."

"Mmphmmrmm," said SpongeBob. Squidward used his foot to flip the uncooperative sponge right side up. He was beginning to find SpongeBob's despondent behaviour unsettling. As much of a pain in the neck SpongeBob usually was, his blind optimism and

overzealousness was infinitely more preferable to the Squidward 2.0 that lay listlessly before him.

"So what are you going to do? Just never come back here again? Never make friends with another person over fifty?" Squidward snatched back the spatula. "Don't make me throw this again. My aim is terrible and somebody might end up with a serious spatula injury. You wouldn't want that on your conscience, would you?"

"OK, OK, I'm going!"

True to his word, SpongeBob straightened up and approached the reception desk, the squeak of his shoes reverberating throughout the hallway with every step he took. The fish manning the desk looked up from his paperwork. He looked surprised to see SpongeBob and a little apprehensive.

"Hey, Frank," said SpongeBob. So far so good.

"Hey, kid," he replied, relaxing into a friendly smile, "You doing OK?"

SpongeBob nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Squidward narrowed his eyes and glanced suspiciously at SpongeBob. Either this was the blind optimism speaking or SpongeBob had finally learned how to lie convincingly.

"Well, it's nice to see you again. And Mr. …?" He glanced at Squidward quizzically.

"Oh, yeah," said SpongeBob, wrapping an arm around Squidward and drawing him close, "This is my friend-"

"No."

"Buddy-"

"No."

"Accomplice."

"Unless I've been robbing banks with you in my sleep I don't think you understand the meaning of that word."

"Acquaintance?"

"Let go, SpongeBob, you're crushing my ribs!" gasped Squidward.

"This is my acquaintance, Squidward," finished SpongeBob. Squidward detached himself from the uninvited embrace and massaged his ribcage resentfully.

Frank watched this exchange with a look of bemusement on his face, then seemed to remember something and ducked underneath the counter. "You came for these, right?" He dumped a heavy stack of "Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy" comic books on the desk.

"My collection! Thanks!" SpongeBob dragged them closer, thumbing eagerly through the top one. He lingered on the center page, a pull-out poster which depicted the younger of the two titular heroes. "But actually … I'm here to see Barnacle Boy."

# Chapter 5

This was where SpongeBob had first met Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy in the flesh, after years of fawning over the long-running Saturday morning television show and extensive library of comic books. This couch, facing this television, which was currently muted and tuned to a mind-numbingly boring show in which mind-numbingly boring people bought mind-numbingly boring antique anchor chains and talked about them extensively. At least, SpongeBob assumed they were talking. They could just have been opening and closing their mouths silently for all he knew. He doubted it would make much difference to his enjoyment of the show either way. Antique anchor chains weren't really his thing.

SpongeBob was perched on what he still considered to be Mermaid Man's side of the couch. Barnacle Boy sat next to him in his usual place, one elbow propped on the arm rest, his head leaning wearily into his hand. The atmosphere was tense and almost oppressive; the hushed silence accentuated every cough, shuffle and newspaper rustle. SpongeBob forced himself to sit upright, fearing that if he sank into the seat too much the overwhelming sense of apathy would overcome him and he'd become permanently reticent or disappear altogether.

In short, Shady Shoals actually felt like a rest home today. He felt uncomfortably bright and garish, offensively yellow in a sea of subdued gray.

Usually SpongeBob's visits were a flurry of excitement, an afternoon of action and adventure, of total immersion in the world of his heroes. Even on quiet days there was an endless supply of rambling stories to be told, which he would happily listen to for hours, sat cross-legged and doe-eyed at the slippered or flippered feet of Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy respectively, hanging on to their every word. This latter activity wasn't restricted to superhero-themed tales from Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy; the rest home was a

goldmine of people with years of life experience and therefore years of interesting stories to tell.

Although it had been difficult getting here, now that he was in the presence of at least one of his heroes SpongeBob's instinct was to dive right into his usual routine, show everybody his perfected Sinister Slug impression, crack a few jokes and just generally try to lighten the mood, but today he repressed these urges as a mark of respect. It wasn't easy. To see Barnacle Boy in particular looking so tired and miserable (even more so than usual) was nothing short of torture.

As a kind of compromise, a halfway point between rigor mortis and leaping around on the tabletops in a home-made napkin cape and necktie mask, SpongeBob turned to Barnacle Boy and broke the silence. "Can I ask you something?"

Barnacle Boy sighed resignedly. "Fire away."

"Well." SpongeBob pulled his feet up onto the couch, crossed his legs and swivelled 90 degrees to the left so that his attention was fully on Barnacle Boy. This act alone seemed to startle the aged superhero, whose eyes left the television for the first time that day in order to gaze quizzically at SpongeBob. "You know how, on the show, you hunt down the bad guys and protect Bikini Bottom from their evil villain ways? But you also do that in real life, right? I know because I hang out with you a lot. I even helped you a few times. But I've never seen a cameraman. So how how do the producers of the show know when to come and film you? Do you do special filming for the show? Like, a staged fight afterwards? Do the bad guys get paid?"

When SpongeBob finally paused for breath, a smile tugged at Barnacle Boy's lips. Or maybe it was a grimace. As Barnacle Boy continued to survey him in silence, SpongeBob began to wonder if he'd made a mistake. The longer he wondered, the surer he became that it had been incredibly insensitive to ask such trivial fan questions in light of yesterday's events. His stomach gave an uncomfortable

lurch and his cheeks began to burn with shame as he awkwardly shifted back to his pre-question position, legs dangling and hands folded politely in his lap once more.

"Sorry."

"You know," said Barnacle Boy, "You're the first person who hasn't asked about Saturday night."

SpongeBob cringed, cursing himself for being so tactless. "Should I have? I'm really sorry. I just wasn't thinking, I guess."

"No, it's OK," said Barnacle Boy, much to SpongeBob's surprise, "It actually makes a nice change."

SpongeBob wasn't really sure how to respond to this. "So you … don't want to talk about Mermaid Man?"

"We can if you want," explained Barnacle Boy, "I just meant that a question about cameramen makes a nice change from … you know."

At first SpongeBob wasn't quite sure what he was supposed to know, but then he thought back to his first painfully long night of mourning Mermaid Man and the relief that his regular workday routine of flipping patties had brought. He figured that answering fan questions must be the elderly superhero equivalent, and being the question asker was a service that he was more than happy to provide.

"So," said SpongeBob, now grinning toothily as he re-assumed his usual role as loyal fan, "What *is* the deal with the cameramen?"

The appreciative smile he received in return, weary as it was, made his heart soar.

"Sorry, kid," teased Barnacle Boy, "I can't tell you."

SpongeBob drooped, unable to hide his disappointment. "Why not?"

"Because I don't know myself. I've been doing this gig for so many years now, it's hard to keep track of details like that, you know?" Barnacle Boy got to his feet, stretching and stifling a yawn with the back of his hand.

SpongeBob knew that this couldn't be the truth (Barnacle Boy, old as he was, was far from senile) but he wasn't really upset. It was all part of the fun; the mystery of such unanswered questions kept the hook in his mouth and gave him something to speculate about with Patrick during their regular Mermaid Man marathons. These speculation sessions were always rather one-sided, with Patrick's contributions consisting mainly of vacant grunts as his attention was on the show itself rather than SpongeBob's theories, but SpongeBob enjoyed them all the same. Almost as much as he enjoyed acting out the episodes afterwards.

"Oh! That reminds me. Do you still want to see my Sinister Slug impression? It's uncanny." SpongeBob hopped down from the couch excitedly and began a series of unnecessary but impressive-looking stretches in preparation for his big moment. "I did a dry run at the Barg'N-Mart on Friday and everybody freaked out! I don't know why they called a paramedic, though. Barnacle Boy?"

Suddenly realizing that he was alone, SpongeBob stopped stretching and set off in pursuit of Barnacle Boy, who was waiting by the rec room door. Barnacle Boy held the door open, beckoned SpongeBob to follow him and they both passed through into the main hallway, where Barnacle Boy took a right turn along the corridor that led to the residents' bedrooms.

"Why are we going down here?" asked SpongeBob, slightly breathless as he broke into a trot in order to keep up with Barnacle Boy's long strides.

"I have something for you."

Some of the residents' doors were propped open and SpongeBob waved to them as he passed, each time receiving an nod or smile in

return. He would very much have liked to stop and chat but Barnacle Boy seemed to be in a hurry.

Upon reaching the right bedroom, Barnacle Boy led SpongeBob inside and closed the door behind them. For one fleeting moment SpongeBob expected to look at Mermaid Man's bed and see him napping there. There wasn't really anything different or foreboding about the room. In fact, it looked much the same as it had done the last time SpongeBob had been here. Possessions still lay in their usual places; spare slippers, tasteless knick-knacks and mementos from the "glory days" (whenever they were; nobody was able to specify an exact date when queried, and SpongeBob had queried them many times).

The only thing missing was Mermaid Man.

A fresh surge of grief gripped SpongeBob like a vice. He willed himself to stay in control this time, though the effort made his head swim.

Barnacle Boy was rummaging through a small cardboard box that was sat at the end of Mermaid Man's bed. He straightened up, a white envelope in his hand, and passed it to SpongeBob.

"He left you a letter."

SpongeBob flipped it over and read the name written on the front: *SpongeBoy* .

Close enough.

# Chapter 6

*Hey, little hero!*

*If you're reading this, that means one of several things has happened. (Please delete as appropriate.)*

*1. You were overcome with a sudden fit of evil, ransacked my possessions, came across this letter and decided to read it without permission. While your curiosity is understandable, as a long time, fully-paid member of the Mermaid Man & Barnacle Boy Fan Club, you know the rules: evil will not be tolerated. You're still welcome to visit but I'm going to have to ask you to return the official Mermaid Man & Barnacle Boy Fan Club fridge magnet and pencil topper. Subscription is non-refundable.*

*2. Since you're usually a good lad, it's more likely that I have been permanently defeated by evil, in which case you should panic immediately.*

*3. The third and most likely scenario is that old age finally caught up with me. It is with this scenario in mind that I leave you this letter, as I have a few favors to ask of you.*

*Firstly, assuming that Barnacle Boy hasn't yet suffered the same fate, please make sure that he keeps eating his vegetables. A growing boy needs all the vitamins he can get.*

*Secondly, and most importantly, you should remember that there was no evil at work here; only the inevitable hand of fate. Contrary to popular belief, most superheroes are mortal. Especially old superheroes. The bra doesn't protect me from death. In fact, between you and me, I really only wear it because it looks good.*

*Though my time unfortunately had to come to an end, I hope that you are not discouraged and will continue to do for others what you*

*did for me.*

*Stay safe, stay happy, and stay on the path of evil. Or should that be away from the path of evil? I forget. But you're a smart kid, I'm sure you'll work it out.*

*Yours,*

*Mermaid Man*

# Chapter 7

"... Yours, Mermaid Man," finished SpongeBob. Before tackling the letter he had slid to a sitting position on the floor, back propped against Barnacle Boy's bed and spindly legs splayed out in front of him. Barnacle Boy, in an act of camaraderie, had followed suit and seated himself next to the youngster, though the journey down had been nerve-racking and he wasn't entirely confident that he would be able to make it back up again without dislocating a joint or two.

It was late afternoon now and strangely calm. A gentle current carried a steady stream of bubbles past the porthole window and Barnacle Boy watched this for a while in order to give SpongeBob some time to re-read the litter silently, if he wished to do so. When he glanced back to his right, he noticed that SpongeBob's attention, too, had been captured by the bubble stream.

"He was a lot more lucid in writing, huh?" said Barnacle Boy, in an attempt to keep things moving. He knew from experience how easy it would be to fall into a long, unproductive rumination session. In fact, he'd likely still be in the midst of one had SpongeBob not arrived to break the monotony that morning. Such was life in a retirement home … even when Mermaid Man had been alive.

SpongeBob shrugged. "I always thought he was pretty lucid in real life, too. It was just a different kind of lucid. Well, maybe not lucid in the conventional sense. But you could still understand him if you put a little effort into it, right?"

"Right," agreed Barnacle Boy. He couldn't help but smile. As much of a pain in the hindquarters the kid usually was, with his obnoxious over-enthusiasm and disrespect for personal space, he could also be surprisingly and unintentionally profound.

"I still haven't told Patrick," blurted SpongeBob suddenly, springing to his feet and beginning to pace back and forth distractedly, clutching

the letter with a pained expression on his face.

"Your pink friend?"

"Yeah."

Upon noticing that Barnacle Boy was still stranded on the floor, SpongeBob came to a halt in front of him and offered his hand. Barnacle Boy took it gratefully and heaved himself upright. He was careful not to snap the sponge's rail-thin arm clean in two; it wouldn't be the first time.

"Well, it's been all over the news," said Barnacle Boy. He brushed himself down and sat on the bed with a sigh of relief. "He probably already knows. He watches a lot of television, right?" Barnacle Boy didn't know this for sure but felt that it was a fair assumption to make based on the sea star's less than athletic physique.

"He does. But he mainly just watches the Eating Channel."

More anxious pacing ensued. Barnacle Boy began began to wonder if he'd made the right decision by giving the kid his letter so soon and re-opening what was still a very sore wound. The grief was still raw for him, too, but he was perhaps better equipped to deal with it given his years of life experience and the hours that he and Mermaid Man had spent planning for this inevitable situation. In theory. In reality he was struggling much more than he'd care to let on. As a superhero, he was supposed to be a symbol of strength and solidarity.

An ominous smashing sound broke his train of thought and he leapt to his feet in surprise, suddenly agile and ready to fight. "What-? Who-?"

"Oh gosh!" SpongeBob dropped to his knees and began to carefully scoop something off the floor. "I'm sorry, I just wanted to look at it and I -"

Barnacle Boy gave a cry of shock as he noticed what it was that SpongeBob had broken: the very first photograph of Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy as a newly formed crime-fighting duo, which had been displayed in pride of place on top of the dresser. He pushed the sponge aside and took the pieces into his own hands, heart thumping as he inspected the damage.

SpongeBob continued to apologize tearfully. "I didn't mean to … I can fix it, I promise."

Barnacle Boy was hugely relieved to find that the photograph itself remained perfectly intact. The shattered glass of the frame was beyond repair, but frames were replaceable. He tipped the shards into the wastebasket.

Sinking back onto the bed with the photograph cradled in his lap, he felt his anger ebb away as he examined the picture closely for the first time in years. He had been in great shape back then; lean, youthful, and much better looking in a skimpy costume. But the biggest difference between the young man in the picture and his present day self was the positive attitude, clear even within this still image. His posture radiated confidence and dependability; his wide grin sparkled with enthusiasm. And how he had looked up to Mermaid Man …

He had been far from perfect, but Mermaid Man had nurtured his passion for doing good and righting wrongs. Barnacle Boy remembered those early days fondly and wondered when exactly he had become such an irritable, cynical stick-in-the-sand.

"Barnacle Boy?"

The piping voice came from so closely behind Barnacle Boy that he could feel the breath on his neck and, for the second time in only a few minutes, he yelped and almost jumped out of his skin.

"How many times have I told you not to creep up on me like that?" he snapped, rubbing his neck and turning to fix SpongeBob, who

was stood on the bed only inches behind him, with a glare.

"Sorry," said SpongeBob. He seated himself next to Barnacle Boy and glanced guiltily at the broken picture frame. "I just wanted to know if you were OK. I'll bring a new frame next time I come or – or I could run down to the store right now if you -"

"It doesn't matter," reassured Barnacle Boy, "There's probably a whole case of them in the storage room. Old people love looking at photographs, you know? It helps us to remember how much better things were back then and how terrible being old is in comparison."

The hyperbole was lost on SpongeBob, who nodded understandingly.

"Um, Barnacle Boy?"

"What is it now, kid?" mumbled Barnacle Boy. It came out harsher than he had intended, but he was starting to wish SpongeBob would just leave him in peace. Although well-intentioned, he was exhausting enough to deal with on a good day, never mind what was possibly the worst day of his life. Add in the destruction of personal property and anybody's patience would wear thin.

"What are you going to do now?" asked SpongeBob. "Mermaid Man was your best friend in the whole world. You did everything together. You were a team."

"Yes … we were," said Barnacle Boy. He pondered for a moment, analysing a sudden idea, then decided to roll with it and crept over to the door to check the peephole for potential eavesdroppers. Once he sure that they were alone, he pulled a surprised SpongeBob close and dropped his voice to a conspirational whisper. "Listen closely. Meet me in the Mermalair, 8pm tonight. Tell no-one. Got it?"

SpongeBob nodded eagerly.

# Chapter 8

After such a turbulent day, SpongeBob found sitting in his dimly lit library and organizing his prized Mermaid Man comic book collection to be very therapeutic. As the majority of the issues were already well worn from multiple readings, the ones involved in the rest home incident weren't any more noticeably damaged than the others. SpongeBob was thankful to own them in any state, perhaps now more than ever. He smoothed creases out of the occasional rumpled cover and slotted each book back into its rightful place on the shelf.

It wasn't long before a loud, metallic knocking sound brought SpongeBob out of his reverie. He got up, stretched, and went to answer the door. A large figure loomed just outside and as SpongeBob's eyes gradually adjusted to the light he recognized several pointy appendages and familiar pair of flowered shorts.

"Are you ready?" Patrick greeted him with a dopey grin and a bamboo net. SpongeBob must have looked surprised because Patrick's smile faltered and he cocked his head suspiciously. "You didn't forget, did you?"

It quickly dawned on SpongeBob that Patrick was here to collect him for their usual evening of jellyfishing.

"Uh … no," he lied, to spare Patrick's feelings, "Of course I didn't. I wouldn't forget. I've never forgotten before. Why would you think I'd forget?"

SpongeBob chuckled nervously.

"Well, all right! Let's go!"

The pink sea star swished his net through the water and provided a series of accompanying grunts and battle cries. SpongeBob, hand still resting on the door handle, wondered how to break the news.

"Listen, Patrick ..."

"Barnacles," mumbled Patrick, "I hate listening."

SpongeBob grew steadily more irritated as Patrick continued to goof around with the net. "This is important!"

"Well then, what are we waiting for?" asked Patrick, thrusting the net into a startled SpongeBob's hands.

"I'm not talking about jellyfishing, Patrick, I need to-" SpongeBob screamed as Patrick hoisted him easily onto his shoulders and, laughing his deep, good-natured laugh, began to charge down Conch Street. Further pleas for his best friend to take him seriously died on SpongeBob's lips. He couldn't ignore the surge of joy, the sting of the cool water as it streamed through his pores, and soon joined Patrick in raucous laughter, his troubles left behind in the confusion.

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As dusk rolled in and the weak sun dipped behind a horizon of grassy dunes, SpongeBob and Patrick flopped onto their backs for a well-earned rest after an intense jellyfishing session. SpongeBob felt more like his usual, happy self than he had done in days. Lying in the cool, soft grass of Jellyfish Fields, the straggling rays of sunlight just barely warm on his face, he was exhausted but content.

Patrick gave a rumbling snore. With a heavy heart, SpongeBob remembered that he still hadn't told his friend about the death of their hero. Jellyfishing had been a welcome distraction, but he knew he would have to say something eventually.

"Pat?"

The lethargic sea star was still out cold.

"Hey, Pat," said SpongeBob, giving him a gentle dig in the ribs with his elbow. "Patrick!"

Patrick groaned and rolled over. "What?"

"I, uh, went to visit Mermaid Man yesterday," began SpongeBob.

"Did you hear that he died? They were talking about it on the Eating Channel last night."

"You – know?" spluttered SpongeBob. "Why didn't you say anything? I've been worrying about how to tell you and then you turn up at my house like there's nothing wrong and we go jellyfishing like any other day and I thought you just didn't know yet but this whole time you did know and-"

Patrick watched SpongeBob rant and pace in bewilderment, mouth hanging open slightly. "We always go jellyfishing on Mondays. I thought you were having a good time."

"Yes, but -" SpongeBob paused, looked at Patrick, and realized that he was right. They had had a good time. But there was still something he didn't understand. "Aren't you upset?" he finished quietly.

"Why wouldn't I be? He was my favorite superhero, too," rebutted Patrick, sounding hurt. He paused. "But you *really* liked Mermaid Man, huh?"

SpongeBob nodded miserably. "He wasn't just my favorite superhero," he mumbled, "He was my friend."

"Well, there's still Barnacle Boy, right?" said Patrick, patting SpongeBob's shoulder comfortingly.

SpongeBob winced at the tactlessness of this statement but knew that Patrick was only trying to help. "Well … yes," he agreed.

The mention of Barnacle Boy reminded SpongeBob that he had arranged to meet up right about now. He didn't have a watch but the light was quickly fading and he knew it must be close to 7pm.

"Hey, Pat? I have to get going," said SpongeBob. For a moment he considered bringing Patrick along since he, too, loved visiting the Mermalair, but then remembered that he had promised to tell no-one.

"OK," said Patrick, none the wiser. "Same time tomorrow?"

"I wouldn't miss it for anything," nodded SpongeBob.

"Pinkie promise?" asked Patrick, extending one of his hands expectantly

"You don't have any pinkies, Patrick," said SpongeBob, grinning.

Patrick frowned forlornly at his digitless appendage, then looked hopefully back up at SpongeBob. "Stumpy promise?"

SpongeBob took it and shook it. "Stumpy promise."

# Chapter 9

The air hung heavily in the Mermalair. Although the evening outside was mild, the warm currents did not find their way into the secret cave, which remained cool and earthy as usual. A steady drip echoed from somewhere in the darkness. These primitive surroundings only served to accentuate the impressiveness of the highly advanced equipment they housed. Multiple control panels, blinking and beeping softly; wall-sized maps and blueprints, speckled with pins and annotations; mysterious weapons and gadgets of all kinds, displayed prominently in stands and cases for ease of access.

Barnacle Boy paced the cave slowly, his rubber boots scuffing on the uneven floor. Waiting. But he didn't have to wait long; an immediately recognizable faint yelling indicated that his visitor was nearby. The screams grew louder, accompanied by a crescendo of metallic rattles and bangs, until finally a yellow blur dropped ungracefully from the ceiling and landed at Barnacle Boy's feet in a dazed, gigging heap.

"What did you take the secret entrance for?" asked Barnacle Boy, offering the giddy sponge a hand.

"You said to tell no-one, so I wanted to make sure I wasn't being followed," said SpongeBob, "And why would I use a door when the alternative is a big metal chute?"

Barnacle Boy rolled his eyes. "We'll have to work on your entrance technique. You're supposed to be quiet. It's not very secret if everybody within a two mile radius can hear you doing it. Anyway ..." He gestured for SpongeBob to follow and walked deeper into the cave. "I called you here for a very important reason."

"Because you enjoy my company?" said SpongeBob, clinging to Barnacle Boy like a limpet and gazing up at him with a big smile and hopeful eyes.

"Wha-? No!" spluttered Barnacle Boy in surprise, prying the sponge away from his waist. SpongeBob looked crestfallen. "I mean, uh, sure. But there's something else."

Barnacle Boy was about to explain what the "something else" was when he noticed an unpleasant, sticky residue where SpongeBob had made contact with his usually pristine red shirt. Disgusted, he pulled off a similarly sticky glove and thrust it accusingly at SpongeBob. "What is this? Jelly?"

SpongeBob licked his hand experimentally. "I guess."

Determined not to derail this meeting with questions about why SpongeBob was covered in jelly, Barnacle Boy pressed on.

"Mermaid Man and I were a superhero duo … a team," he mused, turning to examine the main bulletin board, full of regret for the things that they had never had time to achieve together and the plans that had never come to fruition. "And now that he's no longer with us, I guess I'm going to need a sidekick of my own."

"OK. Well, I'll ask around and let you know if I find anybody suitable," replied SpongeBob, the heavily loaded statement soaring straight over his square head.

"I was talking about you," clarified Barnacle Boy. "You can be my sidekick."

"Me?" said SpongeBob, pointing at his chest. "But I don't have a superpower."

Barnacle Boy knelt down to the sponge's level and went to place a hand on his shoulder, but remembered about the jelly just in time and stopped a few inches short. "Look, kid. You're about as subtle as an Alaskan Bull Worm, that laugh of yours is the most obnoxious sound in the ocean and nearly everything you touch either breaks or goes wrong. But you're the best diplomat in Bikini Bottom."

"Diplomat?" said SpongeBob, cocking an eyebrow quizzically. "Is that like a laundromat? I am good at cleaning things. As a sponge, it's in my nature."

"Uh, no," said Barnacle Boy. "It means you're good at reasoning with people. You know … talking. Diffusing a situation. Negotiating. Making amends." SpongeBob clearly still didn't understand. "You make people happy. That's your superpower."

"Really? Gosh. That seems kind of cheesy," laughed SpongeBob.

"What do you mean?" scowled Barnacle Boy, standing up straight and placing his hands on his hips indignantly. "I thought you of all people appreciated the power of friendship."

"Oh, I do," assured SpongeBob, "It's just … that's not a *real* superpower. I can't make water balls or assemble the creatures of the deep."

"Well then, you'll be pleased to know that Mermaid Man wanted you to have this," said Barnacle Boy. He pressed a small red button beside a nearby display case and the protective tubing retracted into the ceiling with a whoosh and a cloud of mist, which cleared to reveal a purple belt emblazoned with a large letter M that twinkled enticingly. "He knew how much you admired it."

"Mermaid Man's secret utility belt!" SpongeBob gasped, the twinkle reflected in his wide, shiny eyes. He reached out to take it, but Barnacle Boy swatted his hands away.

"Don't touch! Remember what happened last time you were in control of this thing?" scolded Barnacle Boy.

SpongeBob laughed guiltily. "Oh yeah … good times."

"You're not allowed to go near it until you've had some lessons," insisted Barnacle Boy, and then, muttering to himself as he turned

his back on SpongeBob to ponder the situation, "And even then I have some reservations ..."

As if to prove his point, a sudden jet of light ricocheted throughout the Mermalair, pinging off monitors, glass cases and other reflective surfaces before hitting Barnacle Boy squarely in the back of the head. He yelped in pain, rubbing at what was now an angry, red and perfectly circular burn.

"Sorry," said SpongeBob, attempting an apologetic grin.

"What did I just say?" snapped Barnacle Boy, snatching the belt from the careless sponge's grasp.

"Something about kelp jerky?" said SpongeBob, somewhat distantly. His attention was still on the belt, which he gazed at longingly. Barnacle Boy very pointedly stowed it out of sight.

"This is serious," said Barnacle Boy. "You have some very big shoes to fill!"

Predictably, the metaphor was lost on SpongeBob, who stared at his feet and wiggled his toes in confusion. "Then you should probably ask somebody else. I'm only a size -"

"It means that you have a lot to live up to," explained Barnacle Boy. SpongeBob's face was full of bewilderment and although Barnacle Boy had assumed that the kid would jump at the chance to officially join the team, he began to wonder if SpongeBob did actually want this or if he even understood what was being proposed. "I mean … you *would* have a lot to live up to. If you wanted to be my sidekick."

"Are you kidding? Of course I do!" exclaimed SpongeBob. "I would never let you down! But ..." He frowned anxiously. "I work a lot, you know? And me and Patrick like to go jellyfishing. And I've got to feed Gary. And some days I have boating school. And yesterday I found an old candy bar that had fallen behind the couch and it was furry and gross but Patrick ate it anyway because he eats everything."

"An old candy b- ...? What does that have to do with anything?" asked Barnacle Boy.

SpongeBob shrugged.

"Look, this is hardly a full time job," continued Barnacle Boy. "I'd just need you to help out every now and then. It wouldn't really be any different than what you already do to help … except you'd get a superhero alias."

SpongeBob gasped excitedly. "Finally! Man Sponge *officially* reporting for duty! Whoopee!" He leapt into the air, but Barnacle Boy caught him by the ankle.

"Man Sponge?" he repeated. "I don't think so."

"But … why not?" pouted SpongeBob, his face full of disappointment.

"I have to be 'Man' now. It asserts my authority as leader," said Barnacle Boy.

"Tartar sauce. 'Sponge Boy' doesn't sound nearly as good," sighed SpongeBob.

"Well, you'll have plenty of time to work on that problem tonight," suggested Barnacle Boy, glancing at his watch, "But for now I think we'd better wrap this meeting up; it's getting late. Tomorrow, same time, same place?"

"Yes, sir! I won't let you down!" saluted SpongeBob. He turned a neat 180 degrees and began to stride purposefully toward the door. Barnacle Boy was touched by SpongeBob's enthusiasm. The way in which SpongeBob tripped over an untied shoelace, plunged head-first into a hard, unforgiving cave wall and knocked himself out cold, however, reminded Barnacle Boy to keep his expectations realistic.

# Chapter 10

*It's the new adventures of Barnacle Man and that Sponge Kid! And, for some reason, that Sponge Kid's fat pink friend. We join our heroes in the legendary subterranean Mermalair, heroically debating this heroic new superhero team arrangement.*

"What is *he* doing here?" spluttered Barnacle Boy, pointing at Patrick. "You weren't supposed to tell anybody about this!"

"I'm sorry," said SpongeBob, "I thought that only applied to the first meeting. And, well ..." He put an arm around Patrick, who looked dejected. "He's my best friend in the whole world."

"How much have you told him?" asked Barnacle Boy.

SpongeBob glanced sideways at Patrick, beginning to realize that he'd apparently made a mistake. "Everything."

Barnacle Boy sighed in exasperation.

"But if it makes you feel any better," continued SpongeBob, "Patrick has some short-term memory problems, so we could turn back now and he probably won't even remember we came in the first place."

Patrick raised his hand and nodded in acknowledgement.

"No … he's here now; he might as well stay," said Barnacle Boy. "Against my better judgement ..."

"All right!" cried SpongeBob, heart soaring. He exchanged a high-five with Patrick and leapt onto his shoulders, the duo more than ready for their first evening of official crime-fighting under the tutelage of an expert. "We're ready … to protect the good citizens of Bikini Bottom from the ever-present threat of a super-villain attack and evil things in general!"

"And maybe get a snack on the way," added Patrick.

"To the Invisible Boatmobile!" screeched SpongeBob, steering Patrick in what he thought was the right direction, though given that the Invisible Boatmobile was invisible, he couldn't be completely sure. It didn't matter anyway; before they could make any real progress, Barnacle Boy deftly stepped in front of them. Navigating this sudden obstacle proved too much of a challenge for Patrick, who tripped and fell, taking SpongeBob down with him.

"Not so fast," said Barnacle Boy. "Where are your costumes? You can't go on patrol in street clothes."

"Oh! I almost forgot," laughed SpongeBob, springing to his feet. With one swift motion he tore his usual outfit from his body, revealing the official Mermaid Man costume he was wearing underneath. SpongeBob had chosen this costume in honor of his hero, but had modified it slightly as he didn't want Barnacle Boy to think he was trying to replace Mermaid Man. The plastic utility belt had been left at home, and the front of the costume now bore the blue letters "SK", which SpongeBob had painstakingly stitched there himself overnight. "Ta-da! What do you think?"

SpongeBob waited anxiously for Barnacle Boy's approval, and was very relieved when the old man slowly cracked a smile.

"Not bad at all," said Barnacle Boy. "SK?"

"Sponge Kid," clarified SpongeBob. After all, that was how Barnacle usually referred to him. Why fix what wasn't broken? Barnacle Boy apparently agreed, because he laughed appreciatively and gave SpongeBob a jovial slap on the back.

"And what about you, pinky?" said Barnacle Boy, turning to Patrick.

"I'm Sponge Kid's best friend," said Patrick proudly. Following SpongeBob's example, he removed his shorts with a flourish. Unlike SpongeBob, however, he wasn't wearing a costume underneath.

Barnacle Boy looked less than impressed with the underpants-clad sea star in front of him, but SpongeBob spluttered with laughter.

*Our heroes, one of whom is only wearing underpants for some reason, emerge triumphantly from the Mermalair. Can Barnacle Man and his two new young wards keep the city free of danger, or will their efforts be ineffectual but amusing to watch? Stay tuned to find out … as if you don't already know.*

SpongeBob inhaled the familiar scent of fresh-baked cookies and peered eagerly into the treedome. To his left, Patrick was drooling. To his right, Barnacle Boy was scratching his head in confusion.

"She doesn't *look* like she's in danger," said Barnacle Boy.

Inside, Sandy was calmly humming to herself as she set a plate of cookies in the centre of her picnic table.

"Trust me," assured SpongeBob, "I know Sandy. She acts cool and collected on the outside but it's just a ruse … probably. We should definitely check it out."

"Well … if you say so," said Barnacle Boy. He didn't look entirely convinced, but shrugged and settled a water helmet onto his shoulders. "Barnacle Man and Sponge Kid and … this other guy … move in!"

SpongeBob charged the treedome door with a battle cry; a small wave of water sloshed onto the grass inside as Patrick and Barnacle Boy followed him inside. Sandy looked stunned at the sudden intrusion and for a moment spluttered incoherently.

"Look out, Sandy! Sea monster!" cried SpongeBob, pointing frantically over her shoulder. She turned to look, adopting a fighting stance, and SpongeBob took the opportunity to pounce on the unguarded plate of cookies.

"What in tarnation-?" Sandy turned back around just in time to see the last of her cookies disappearing into SpongeBob and Patrick's mouths. Patrick swallowed and belched appreciatively. "SPONGEBOB! PATRICK!"

SpongeBob grinned and took a few steps backwards as Sandy approached him furiously. "We were, uh, just checking them for poison."

*8:07pm. Barnacle Man calls a top secret meeting back at the top secret Mermalair to secretly review what his new superhero team has accomplished so far.*

"So ..." began Barnacle Boy, barely hiding his frustration and tapping a blank notepad with the end of his pen. "Let's review what we accomplished today."

SpongeBob raised his hand eagerly.

"Oh! Oh! We rescued Mrs. Puff's snail from that coral tree." SpongeBob jumped onto the table and began to re-enact the day's events. "We spent three hours twenty minutes fishing Mr. Krabs's dime out of that drain. We stole acorn chip cookies from Sandy and escaped with only minor bruising. And we had a lot of fun."

Barnacle Boy smirked. "Well, it was pretty funny when that cop tackled you to the ground."

"Good think they accept cookie bribes, huh, Pat?" said SpongeBob, nudging Patrick in the ribs.

"That was not a bribe," sulked Patrick, "He stole that cookie from me, plain and simple."

"Karma," noted Barnacle Boy, nodding sagely.

"Actually, it was acorn chip," corrected Patrick.

# Chapter 11

*Epilogue*

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SpongeBob shuffled slowly down the tiled corridor. His vision was completely obscured by the unsteady tower of comic books balanced precariously in his outstretched arms, but after several years of dedicated weekly visits he was so familiar with the layout of Shady Shoals that it barely mattered.

"Hey Frank," he greeted as he wobbled past the reception desk, for though he could not see the receptionist he knew he must be there. Sure enough, he received the usual greeting in response.

SpongeBob collapsed with exhaustion upon reaching the rec room. This was by far the largest stack of books he had ever hauled into the rest home, a feat which didn't go unnoticed by Barnacle Boy, who looked up from his game of solitaire warily. SpongeBob pushed himself into a sitting position with his still trembling arms and began to sift through the pile purposefully, dividing it into numerous smaller piles.

"Look, kid, you know I'm always happy to sign stuff but don't you think that's a little excessive? I have to draw a line somewhere."

"Don't worry," smiled SpongeBob, "These are already signed. I'm donating them to Shady Shoals! Now you guys don't have to play bingo or checkers or solitaire anymore. Isn't that great?"

"Donating-? But I thought you loved those comics!" said Barnacle Boy. There was a trace of indigence in his voice.

"Oh, I do!" said SpongeBob. "These are my spares."

"You mean … these are all duplicates?"

"Tripilcates," corrected SpongeBob. He got to his feet, surveying the neat little piles with pride. "I'll hand them out when we get back."

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A large, handsome coral tree loomed over the path ahead. As they passed underneath it, SpongeBob appreciated the cool shade. He could hear a scallop twittering somewhere among the pale pink branches.

The sight of the tree seemed to jog Barnacle Boy's memory. "Did you ever get Mrs. Barbel's snail down from that tree?" he asked.

"Eventually," said SpongeBob. "She called the fire brigade but apparently they don't actually rescue snails from coral trees, because they have more important things to do, like putting out fires. So then I wasn't sure what to do. I'm normally great with snails but Fitzy wouldn't come down for anything. In the end Patrick turned up and he still had some of those acorn chip cookies in his pocket and we managed to bribe her down-"

"Wait a minute ..." Barnacle Boy began to count on his fingers, a growing expression of disgust creasing his face. "That was over 3 months ago!"

"Snails aren't fussy. They love moldy pocket cookies, believe me."

They turned into Bikini Bottom Cemetery, passing through a handsome set of black iron gates. Mermaid Man's grave still bore the signs of being recently dug, but grass was was beginning to cover the patch of sandy earth. At the foot of the headstone was a small pile of mementoes from previous visits. The action figures, newspaper clippings and denture cream stuck out like a sore thumb compared to the sea of rather more subtle flowers and teddy bears on surrounding graves, but SpongeBob knew that Mermaid Man wouldn't mind.

He knelt down and cleared a little space in the middle, then reached into his pocket and pulled out his latest offering. It was a small,

framed photograph of SpongeBob riding on the shoulders of Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy, beaming with pleasure and hardly able to believe his luck.

"This was the first time you let me come on patrol, remember? We ate doughnuts and sang that song about you laying an egg. And the Atomic Flounder nearly melted your face off. It was one of the best times I ever had."

As SpongeBob wiped some lint from the glass he felt Barnacle Boy crouch next to him, his gloved hand giving SpongeBob's shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"I'd be lying if I said I enjoyed our little reunion with the Atomic Flounder, but we do have some pretty good times together, don't we?"